

JOHN HENRY CUTLER

COUNTRY
EDITOR,
BIOGRAPHER,
POLITICAL
HISTORIAN

by Nancy Anne Dawe

At one end of South Station Street in the picturesque, seaside village of Duxbury, Massachusetts, is a long, low brick building that houses the weekly newspaper, *Duxbury Clipper*. Normally, it's a quiet street, but on Mondays, the day before the paper goes to press, cars wheel in and out of the *Clipper* lot carrying news-laden townspeople, photographers, the police chief with the previous week's log, merchants with ads, and local officials dropping by to discuss the town's events.

The reason for all this activity is the man inside: handsome, white-haired John Henry Cutler, *Clipper* owner-editor-publisher, former linguist and college professor — and writer of note.

"Every person who writes for newspapers has two ambitions," he says. "One is to be syndicated; the other is to own his own weekly. I've been fortunate enough to have done both."

Plus a whole lot more.

Among other things, his writing brought him a friendship with the late Gene Tunney that spanned their adult years; gave him a chance to rub World War II shoulders with the late Ernie Pyle and the late Robert. Sherwood; once made him a thinly veiled short story character drawn by an angered John P. Marquand; and turned him into perhaps the most knowledgeable living chronicler of the political history of Boston and Massachusetts.

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The strains that have dominated his life — brilliance, humor, the desire to write, and the ability to express his opinions forcefully — showed up early. As did the legendary James Michael Curley, several-times mayor of Boston, four-time congressman, governor of the Commonwealth — and twice a prisoner in jail.

As Cutler's mother would later tell him, when he was five and growing up in Boston, they were present when Mayor Curley dug the first shovelful for a subway that ran from Kenmore Square to St. Mary's Street in Brookline. Curley, she said, took off his top hat and let it drop over the boy's ears.

Forty-two years would pass — and a long writing apprenticeship would be served — before their paths would cross again.

At 15, Cutler was writing "little profiles" of young people who showed up each Friday afternoon when his mother held open house. Two years later, when his first published piece appeared in the *Boston Latin School Register*, he'd begun to read "hundreds of biographies," collecting little intimate glimpses of people which he'd "write down on an envelope and stuff in a drawer. Things

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like, whenever Napoleon went off to campaign he always took a gallon of cologne . . ."

That habit continued while he earned his bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. degrees in romance languages and literature at Harvard. "By then, I'd collected so many little-known facts I cross-indexed them into categories — like 'RAIN.' I could write a long feature, 'How Rain Changed the Course of History' . . ."

Those 'little-known facts were soon destined to change his own life.

Dartmouth followed Harvard, where Cutler taught French and Spanish for five pre-World War II years. Though he was a popular instructor and liked teaching, "I wanted to write, write, write!"

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One day, armed with a few features he'd written of little-known facts, he walked into the old *Boston Transcript*. The editor liked them, turning the biographical ones into a later-syndicated column. Then feature stories began to flow in newspapers here and abroad, the *Boston Post* one Sunday running six simultaneously; and articles began appearing in national magazines like *Reader's Digest*, *Esquire*, *Collier's*, and more.

While a World War II naval lieutenant stationed at Recife, Brazil, headquarters of the South Atlantic Fleet, he edited the *South Atlantic News*. At the conclusion of an interview with Senior Vice-Admiral Jonas Ingram (which would later result in a *Liberty* article entitled "Boss of the Atlantic"), Cutler was asked, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

With the bravado of innocence, he replied he'd like to interview Brazilian President Vargas — and all the cabinet ministers. No sooner said than he was on a PBY Mariner, flying to Rio. "Me! Alone! . . . In this huge plane . . . getting paid extra, per DIEM!"

Learning that Commander Gene Tunney, who was in charge of the physical fitness and athletic programs of the U.S. Navy, was coming to Brazil, John wrote a welcoming article, telling how Tunney during World War I had slept on a plank in the mud at the Battle of Verdun, and how, knowing he'd have to back up when he fought Dempsey, he'd practiced running backwards. Their friendship began when Tunney asked how he'd known this.

Those little-know facts again.

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Through Tunney, he later met a "very pompous" John P. Marquand, angering the writer "when I told him he reminded me of the Late George Apley." Several months later, a Marquand story appeared in *Harper's* "about a brash, young navy lieutenant . . . It even had some of the phrases I'd used!" he said, laughing.

If writing has been Cutler's life, for the last 29 years the *Duxbury Clipper* has been his lifeblood. One night in 1950, while he was teaching languages

at Boston University (he'd added Italian and Portuguese during the war), his wife "Bobbie" casually suggested that what their town of Duxbury needed was a weekly paper.

Together they have watched the *Clipper* grow from a shaky, six-page giveaway to a thriving, sometimes 44-page edition, printed on their own presses, and sent to 49 states ("all except the culturally deprived state of Wyoming," jokes Cutler), and seven foreign countries.

Almost everybody in Duxbury reads the *Clipper*, with some subscribers — too impatient for its Thursday mail arrival — buying a newsstand copy the day before. One reason is Cutler's editorials, which can be pungent and heated. Said the *Gardner (Mass.) News* in 1965, "Duxbury is his town, his hobby, and in a special way, his friend," and Cutler doesn't hesitate to speak out when he feels something is amiss.

But interwoven through the *Clipper* years, other writing continued, some fabulous characters marching from his typewriter onto the pages of four books he "doctored" for others, and several he authored alone.

In 1957 — ironically to help keep the *Clipper* afloat — Cutler ghosted Curley's autobiography, *I'd Do It Again!* Except for a book on Woodrow Wilson, it subsequently sold for the highest amount of second serial rights, \$32,000. Bantered Tunney: "I suppose you wrote the preface, too . . . giving yourself all that credit . . ."

What it actually gave Cutler was a close-up look at the kaleidoscopic Curley. On drives from Curley's Scituate summer home to the famed shamrock-shuttered house on the Jamaicaaway; during long talks with Curley, his cronies, and scores of principals in his story; while searching through Curley's endless basement files and the Boston Public Library; or walking with Curley to the house where he'd been born ("It was in a little alley . . . really just a rookery . . ."), he took the measure of the legend and the man.

There was the conspiratorial Curley: "Tell John about the mayoral campaign when you hired college students to act as Baptist ministers to embarrass your opponent," prompted Curley's priest-son, Francis; and the confessional Curley, "who would casually tell me things the press and the Boston Finance Committee had been probing for years . . ."

There was the derisive, belittling Curley, calling Boston Brahmins Leverett Saltonstall and Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., "Stopandstall" and "Little Boy Blue"; while the aristocratic Cardinal William O'Connell, who'd never accepted his shenanigans, was "Crimson Willie."

Even the White House felt Curley's gall. When Franklin Roosevelt — not-

ing it was a sensitive post — offered him the ambassadorship to Poland as thanks for his 1932 election support, the disappointed Curley replied, "If it's such a goddam interesting place, why don't you resign the Presidency and take it yourself?"

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A taker whose coffers swelled each time he held office, "Curley was also exceedingly generous," says Cutler. One day while driving through the South End, Curley saw a man shivering on the sidewalk. He stopped the car, got out and gave the man his brand new overcoat.

The brassy actor who wore squeaky shoes so he'd be noticed in church, and who took elocution lessons to perfect his speech, was a devoted family man as well, stoic when he lost his beloved first wife and seven of his nine children — two of them on the same day.

"He was an absolutely dual personality," says Cutler. "Cruel and vindictive, he could also have dignity." And pride at what he'd done for Boston's poor — building hospitals, playgrounds, and bath houses for people who'd been completely neglected before. "His proudest monument, he told me, were the words Mayor of the Poor, written over his oil portrait at Boston City Hospital — and that was not a pose."

But while he loved what he did for the poor, "he himself aspired to be up among the mighty. The biggest disappointment of his life was when he didn't get an honorary degree from Harvard, who rebuked him because of his bizarre, outlandish, and vulgar conduct."

What was Cutler's overriding impression after such close contact with Curley? "I've met the 'great' . . . DeValera . . . the president of Brazil . . . others . . . but never a person who had the built-in charisma that man had, even when he was in his 80s. He was so different, so individual!"

And a politician to the end. Just minutes before he died in City Hospital in 1958, after being moved from the operating table across some bumpy floors, Curley looked up at his son George and said, "I wish to announce the first plank in my platform for re-election as mayor of Boston will be to have the goddam floors in City Hospital smoothed out."

And then he winked.

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A runaway bestseller followed the Curley book, the humorous *All About Men*, which Cutler fleshed out from an outline of Dr. Joseph Peck, "who'd written nothing but prescriptions for 30 years"; then intrigue with *Secret Diary From Red China*, which had been written interlinearly between the lines of another novel, and smuggled out of Red China. Chosen as

one of the best 100 books of 1961, Cutler had expanded the Chinese author's 90 pages of typescript to 240, falling "madly in love" with the novel's heroine en route.

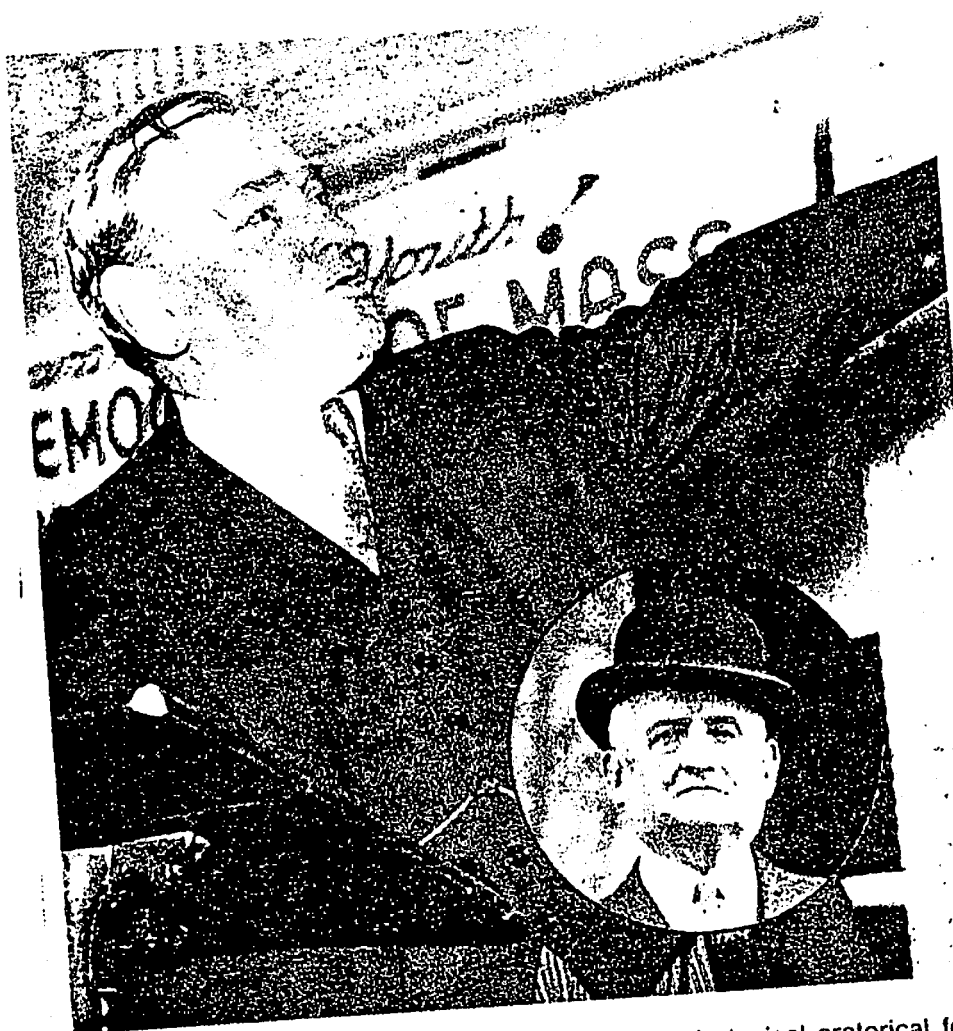
There was even more drama in 1963 with Caryl Chessman's *Face of Justice*. Chessman, the "Red Light Bandit" and convicted murderer who spent the longest time on Death Row in U.S. history, had already written *Cell 2455* and *Trial by Ordeal* in his trilogy on the causes of crime, the treatment of criminals and the ineffectuality of capital punishment.

When the warden of San Quentin forbade him to write any more books, he pretended to be typing legal briefs, would then tear up his originals, flush them down the toilet, and save the carbons — which were smuggled out.

Cutler, through the publisher and unknown to Chessman, "unwrote" the book, improved his English, and was the entire editor. "I read in *Time* magazine that Chessman warned whoever was working on his book not to cut it (Cutler did, by half) or he'd take care of them. And also that the warden couldn't understand where it was or how it got out.

"It was in MY livingroom!"

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But Cutler's greatest literary mark — and one that reflects the massive research into Massachusetts politics and Boston folklore begun by the Curley book — has been with three formidable Massachusetts personalities.



Boston political arch-foes: James Michael Curley, in typical oratorical form, and John F. "Honey-Fitz" Fitzgerald, inset.

— the ones affluent enough to go South ("I'm one of those," he chuckles).

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"Curley and 'Honey-Fitz' were important because they were the first Irish chieftains to drag them out of the gutter and into respectability." But there were differences between the two: Curley was to carry a bitter sense of alienation; while young Johnny Fitz came to love the North End's narrow streets, later saying, "My playgrounds were the streets and wharves busy with ships from every part of the world."

"He was a bouncy little buccaneer, all right," says Cutler, "but he was also a rogue, inventing jobs for his cronies like 'city dermatologist' . . ." Honey-Fitz would live long enough to be able to dance a table-top jig to celebrate his grandson Jack Kennedy's first congressional victory, and then to predict with the prescience of an old pol that Jack would be President.

Upon reading the book, Joe Kennedy called from Hyannis Port:

"Rose loved the first part (about her), and I loved the second (about him). 'Rose refers to me as 'a leading Boston historian,' " says John impishly. "I don't consider myself another Samuel Eliot Morison."

The book provided other comment: "As factual as a weather report," said the *Chicago Tribune*, "but as irresistibly funny — and sad — as Emmett Kelly, the master clown." Edwin O'Connor, author of the actual *Last Hurrah*, didn't agree, writing a vehe-

ment attack in the *New York Times Book Review*. ("He didn't think I'd treated 'Honey-Fitz' with the dignity he deserved.") Immediately afterward, George Frazier, in his *Boston Herald* column, countered with, "Edwin O'Connor to the O'contrary, John Cutler's book is absolutely absorbing . . ."

"Later, O'Connor cried," says Cutler. "He felt so badly about what he'd done to me."

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"I think writers of contemporary biographies have the most fun," and Cutler had just that with the other two: 1970s *Cardinal Cushing of Boston*, and '72's *Ed Brooke: Biography of a Senator*.

"I take the anecdotal approach, and the anecdote must illumine the personality," he says. "Cushing was harsh-voiced and austere but had a terrific sense of humor. One night, speaking at a banquet for the Red Sox team, who were all dressed in street clothes, he quipped, 'I'm the only guy here who's in uniform! . . .'"

By Cushing's time, the Irish had made a lot of progress, and he was highly respected by the top layers of society. "There are three kinds of aristocracy," says Cutler. "Of birth, of intellect, and of character — and Cushing had character."

Pivoting between the Irish transitional periods, Cushing would officiate at the funerals of both Curley, who'd begun one era, and John Kennedy, the first Irish Brahmin. At both, he prayed in the grating, honest South Boston

voice that was his inheritance, and which he was too proud to change.

Cushing himself died just as the biography came out.

Of former Sen. Brooke, Cutler says, "One of the most brilliant persons I've ever known personally, and except for James Michael Curley, the most charismatic." Brooke, up to then, had consistently refused publisher's pleas, "so it took a great deal of persuasion," says Cutler.

"At first," says Brooke himself, "I didn't want a book because I thought I was too young, hadn't accomplished anything, and thought it premature. Mr. Cutler didn't get in contact with me until after he'd talked to a lot of people. Then when I heard about this man . . . who he was . . . what he was . . . and his scholarship, I was really quite flattered, frankly, that he would write about me . . ."

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While Cutler "felt honored writing about the first elected black senator in the United States," it was easier said than done. After flying to Washington for the first interview, he waited all day in the senator's office while the genuinely busy Brooke occasionally poked an apologetic head around his office door to say, "Sorry!"

Mrs. Brooke was easier to reach at the couple's Newton, Mass., home. "Ostensibly," says Cutler, "the Brookes were happy, but it was sort of wistful. I'd be sitting on a chair interviewing, Mrs. Brooke would get out the albums, and I could detect the sadness . . ."

"I like to be a source historian," he says, and besides the Brookes, he interviewed their daughters, Brooke's mother, sister, his college friends, law partner, those who first got him to run, his personal secretary, Washington and Boston staffs, and the reporters who covered him.

The result of it all was a deepened admiration and respect for the "warm and sympathetic" Brooke — a respect that has remained through Brooke's senatorial defeat. "I felt very bad about that. He was highly respected by the other senators, and to some extent was a victim of the reaction to Watergate and Koreagate. The whole thing was just a domestic tragedy . . ."

What has all his writing brought Cutler?

"Fulfillment! I never wrote primarily for money. I wanted to know people who did things, and just look at the people I've met!"

At 68, Cutler retains much of that enthusiastic boy who read so prodigiously and collected those little-known facts. Along the way, he's lived a few of his own, becoming a man whose writing life is almost as colorful as some of the characters he's portrayed. Like Curley, he could say — only this time in words of his own — "I'd do it again!" ●